DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 380 389 SO 024 812

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TITLE The Practice of In-Depth Study in an Issues-Oriented Social Studies Classroom.
PUB DATE Nov 94
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies (Phoenix, AZ, November 18, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Techniques; Educational Research; Secondary Education; *Social Studies; *Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Issue Centered Education; *Issues Approach

ABSTRACT

This paper describes research that sought to merge the definition of in-depth study and its theoretical underpinnings with the reality of classroom practice. It describes and analyzes one high school public issues class where single topics were developed in depth. The research seeks to answer the question: What does in-depth study look like in practice? In particular, it explores three questions: (1) How and why is knowledge selected, organized, and utilized in the depth classroom, and what meaning do students give it? (2) What is the nature of the social interaction in the classroom, and what meaning do students give it? and (3) What practical teaching dilemmas do teachers face in the everyday practice of in-depth study? Four common characteristics of in-depth study are identified: (1) use of knowledge that is complex, thick, and divergent about a single topic, concept, or event using sources that range beyond the textbook; (2) focus on essential and authentic issues or questions that contain elements of ambiguity, doubt, or controversy; (3) a spirit of inquiry that provides opportunities, support, and assessment mechanisms for students to manipulate ideas in ways that transform their meaning; and (4) sustained time on a single topic, concept, or event. In terms of theory, the research confirms the notion that thinking about and understanding knowledge depend on: (1) its organization around key ideas; (2) a functional base where the learner uses knowledge to solve problems; and (3) a social setting where the learner interacts with teachers and students. (DK)

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THE PRACTICE OF IN-DEPTH STUDY IN AN ISSUES-ORIENTED SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM

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November 18, 1994
Phoenix, Arizona

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THE PRACTICE OF IN-DEPTH STUDY IN AN ISSUES-ORIENTED SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM

Recently critics of secondary social studies have decried its emphasis on breadth of coverage at the expense of in-depth study (Sizer, 1985; Newmann, 1986, 1988; Wiggins, 1989; Van Sickle & Hoge, 1991; Parker, 1991; Sears & Parsons, 1991). This controversy over breadth and depth goes to the heart of the profession's search for direction and purpose. At its core, the controversy reflects a larger dispute about the goals of social studies education. At the core of the breadth argument is a concern for cultural transmission and knowledge acquisition (Gagnon, 1985; Hirsch, 1987; Ravitch, 1985). Its supporters fear that the depth arguments overlook the shared information required for cultural continuity. At the core of the depth argument is a concern for critical and reflective thinking out of which will flow a more complex student understanding and a more thoughtful citizen. Its supporters fear that breadth reduces knowledge to meaningless lists of memorized facts. These differences, rooted in political, philosophical, and epistemological controversies, are not likely to be resolved. However deep the disagreement over goals may be, it cannot hide the pervasiveness of the coverage disease in many social studies classrooms. Several studies reveal that social studies curriculum in most high schools consists largely of isolated fragments of information reduced to lists without coherence, focus, student understanding, or concern for higher order thinking (Goodlad, 1984;

Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985; McNeil, 1986). Despite this flood of information, national tests report how little high school students know about American history and government (Finn & Ravitch, 1988). In addition, perhaps as a result of the emphasis on the memorization of endless facts, students are bored, reporting that social studies instruction makes little significant contribution to their lives (Schug, Todd, & Beery, 1984; Newmann, 1986). Lack of student engagement is a problem that most teachers at all levels struggle with day after day. The curriculum and instruction in large measure is mindless and boring, leading students for the most part to ignore or forget it.

Definition. While the concern for mindless instruction and student disengagement has produced calls for in-depth study, none include a definition of what in-depth study is. In order to produce an operational definition, I examined examples of curricula labeled in-depth (Halsey, 1963; Taba, Levine, & Esley, 1964; Oliver & Newmann, 1971; Lockwood & Harris, 1985; Ladenburg, 1988) and found four common characteristics:

1. The use of knowledge that is complex, thick, and divergent about a single topic, concept, or event using sources that range beyond the textbook. Viewing knowledge as complex and indeterminate, depth study examines numerous pieces of information from a variety of perspectives about the many dimensions of a topic.

2. A focus on essential and authentic issues or questions that contain elements of ambiguity, doubt, or controversy. In-depth study is not mountains of information randomly presented but carefully selected pieces of information, coherently organized around a question of importance to society and adolescents.

3. A spirit of inquiry that provides opportunities, support, and assessment mechanisms for students to manipulate ideas in ways that transform their meaning. In-depth study is not spending six

weeks on World War II where the teacher determines the meaning of the knowledge. Rather, it provides students with opportunities to construct their own understanding and interpretation of important topics.

4. Sustained time on a single topic, concept or event. A single lesson might require two to three days. A single unit might require two to five weeks.

Other forms of effective instruction, including coverage-based ones, may contain one or more of these characteristics. The purpose of defining in-depth study in this way is to distinguish it from superficial, textbook-driven, coverage approaches that emphasize recall of events, names, and terms and from approaches that cover extensive knowledge on a single subject but without the focus on essential issues and sense of inquiry necessary for student understanding. In-depth study combines coherently organized in-depth knowledge with student inquiry and sufficient time. It calls for the existence and integration of the four characteristics in any given unit or series of lessons.

At its core the definition contains elements of a constructivist view of learning, drawing from Piagetian and Deweyan perspectives about learning and recent research by cognitive psychologists (Voss, Tyler, & Yengo, 1983; Voss, Greene, & Post, 1983; Voss, 1983; Glaser, 1984; Cornbleth, 1985; Chi, 1985; Gardner, Perkins, & Perrone, 1991). These perspectives and research support the claim that thinking and understanding depend on the creation of a sufficient knowledge base, organized around a small number of essential questions or ideas, and used by students to solve problems or make decisions. This theoretical perspective supported by research forms the underpinnings of in-depth study.

Research Questions. However, while theory, research, and the definition speak to how knowledge should be selected, organized, and utilized during instruction, they ignore the externalities of the classroom. Their focus is on how knowledge should be, not on how, in fact, it is organized and utilized. What is missing is any understanding of what happens to the theoretical perspectives of Piaget and Dewey as well as the tenets of in-depth study when they confront the social interaction of the real classroom. Yet we know that what a teacher does with knowledge within the structure of a classroom involves the complex social interaction between teacher and student, the practical teaching dilemmas faced by teachers in the moment-to-moment reality of the classroom, and the beliefs and practical knowledge used by teachers to manage these dilemmas (Shulman, 1987; Elbaz, 1983; Lampert, 1984, 1985). The definition of in-depth study and the way it uses knowledge face alteration by the practical knowledge of teachers and the interaction with the complex realities of the classroom.

The research I will describe seeks to merge the definition of in-depth study and its theoretical underpinnings with the reality of classroom practice. It describes and analyzes one high school public issues class where single topics were developed in depth. The research seeks to answer the question: what does in-depth study look like in practice? In particular, it explores three questions: 1) how and why is knowledge selected, organized, and utilized in the depth classroom, and what meaning do students give it? 2) What is the nature of the social interaction in the classroom, and what

meaning do students give it? 3) What practical teaching dilemmas do teachers face in the everyday practice of in-depth study?

Research Design. What follows is an interpretative, qualitative case study (see Merriam, 1988; Erickson, 1990) of one public issues class whose course curricula corresponded closely with the four components of the definition. Required of all sophomores at Martin High School, one of four traditionally-structured high schools in a medium-sized midwestern city, the class contained twenty-six students, mostly white, from middle and upper middle class homes. The class was taught by Kenneth Lansbury, a twenty-six year veteran who held a master's degree in political science. I observed two of Lansbury's units, each of three weeks duration, one on freedom of speech and the other on race and affirmative action, writing fieldnotes and transcribing them after each of my fourteen visits. Using a small number of open-ended descriptive or structural questions (Spradley, 1979), I conducted four one hour interviews with Lansbury and two thirty minute interviews with each of five students. To increase opportunities for triangulation, I examined course descriptions, student readings and assignments, and conducted a written student survey at the end of the second unit. The analysis of the data involved its coding to form domains from which initial assertions emerged. I translated these assertions into a series of memos and two vignettes which were shared with the participants as a means of verifying the credibility of my observations. The result of the analysis is the story and interpretive commentary that follows, a portrait of in-

depth study in an issues-oriented social studies classroom.

The Dialogue of Democracy. The structure of the units in Lansbury's public issues class was identical: 1) an introductory activity designed to grab student interest, 2) class and group discussion of background readings that linked information to a conceptual framework, 3) use of previously taught skills to enable students to take and defend positions on issues, and 4) a scored discussion where students applied their knowledge to a contemporary instance of the issue. Lansbury opened the first unit on free speech by showing a videotaped episode of "The Simpsons" in which Marge Simpson launched a protest against violence on television cartoons. Lansbury believed that starting with content drawn from the students' experiences would pique their interest and enable them to understand the abstract concepts more easily. Not using a textbook, the in-depth knowledge came from readings and worksheets of landmark court cases, ranging from the Alien and Sedition Act to Schenck vs. U.S. to the Tinker case. Not wanting the knowledge to remain inert in students' minds, Lansbury asked his students to present the knowledge in docudramas, make decisions about the court cases in small groups, or explore the conceptual framework of the cases in class discussion. For example, in one class discussion, he required the students, acting as the director of a local fair and using legal concepts explained earlier, to decide whether or not to grant space to the Nazi Party in a town with a large Jewish community.

Equally important to Lansbury was integrating skill

instruction and practice with subject matter content. He advocated the direct teaching of skills as necessary for higher order thinking. He required students to state policy questions, identify and explain definitional, value, and factual issues, and make and defend positions on controversial issues. In fact, these skills served as the foundation for the culminating activity of each unit--the scored discussion (see Zola, 1992).

The task in a scored discussion was for groups of five to eight students to conduct a twenty-five minute discussion of a contemporary free speech issue using an agenda generated by the group earlier. For the free speech issue, the discussions centered of whether the local university should reinstate a hate speech code. Each group conducted their discussion using the knowledge gathered in the unit and practicing the expected skills. Rarely interrupting, Lansbury sat at his desk, pencil poised, scoring each discussion, giving points to students who used evidence, pointed out a contradiction, or made a transition.

Clearly the emphasis in this class was not the random presentation of facts. Instead, Lansbury made a serious effort to have students attach historical and legal inf[illegible]tion to concepts. He asked students to use the information an[illegible]epts to take and defend a position on contemporary public issues. He sought to attach subject matter to local student experiences. None of this was passive as if the learner was a lone investigator of an issue. Each activity required social interaction between Lansbury and his students, and among the students themselves. Discourse was at the

heart of the process.

Lansbury believed that "good public policy might result from dialogue between people where they have to talk about the issues and communicate their positions" (Interview, 3/6). Lecture and recitation were foreign activities. The dialogue took two forms--class discussion and the scored discussion. The class discussion was serious, intense, structured, and sometimes Socratic. Lansbury asked thought-provoking questions and permitted students to take the discussion in a variety of directions. He asserted that one of the central challenges of leading a discussion was "to run from where the students are to where I would like them to be" (Interview, 3/6). During one class discussion in the unit on race and affirmative action, Brian suggested that working hard lead to economic success. Asking other students to confirm or disconfirm Brian's statement, Lansbury spurred controversy, encouraged a variety of perspectives, and helped students connect their ideas to the concepts of equal opportunity and equal results described in the readings. At other times, Lansbury was more directive, particularly as he sought to include subject matter he considered important. These moments were characterized by a reluctance of students to participate. For example, later in the discussion on economic success, when he sought to develop the legal understanding necessary to talk about "the starting line" concept, Lansbury struggled to get students to participate. The students sat there and listened. Lansbury became the disseminator of information, ensuring what he deemed necessary was covered.

During the scored discussions, the structure of the discussion was also systematic and disciplined, starting with a definitional question and proceeding to value and factual questions. Lansbury expected the students to follow their agenda, use evidence from the readings, and stay focused without any single individual dominating. In one scored discussion on affirmative action as a remedy for inequality, the group moved from discussing the definition of inequality to whether or not it was right to discriminate to help minorities. During that discussion, Tim and Mike proposed divergent perspectives and were willing and prepared to question and clarify their responses. Although encouraged and prepared, Lisa was reluctant to say anything. What motivated student participation in scored discussion--scoring points, interest in the topic, or some combination of the two? What meaning did the discussion have for Lisa, the reluctant participant? How did students view the systematic structure of the interaction? These are important questions which I will confront later in this paper.

What explained the dynamics of discourse in Lansbury's classroom. I believe that the answers lie in Lansbury's beliefs and knowledge about teaching and learning, the practical reality of classroom interaction, and outside contextual forces over which Lansbury had little control. These elements interacted to form three teaching dilemmas that defined in-depth study in Lansbury's classroom. Lampert (1985) asserts that the attempt to solve common pedagogical problems in the everyday classroom leads to a series of

practical dilemmas. She accepts these dilemmas as a continuing condition, entangled in a web of contradictory forces, that teachers seek to manage. Although I was aware of Lampert's research, I originally did not search for the dilemmas in Lansbury's classroom. However, in our conversations and my observations, three such dilemmas reoccurred, what I have labeled the director's dilemma, the participation dilemma, and the information dilemma.

The **director's dilemma** consisted of two components. In the first component, Lansbury wanted students to set the agenda for classroom discourse. He wanted to start with student attitudes and experiences, often by finding school and local examples of themes related to the public issue. On the other hand, he wanted to provide them with the information and conceptual framework that he deemed necessary for an understanding of the issue. The dilemma was how to merge the two. In the second component, Lansbury wanted students to struggle with the information, letting them discover the complexities of the issue and create their own meaning of the knowledge. On the other hand, he wanted to direct them to the meaning of that knowledge that he considered most important. Lansbury expressed the dilemma this way:

> You get caught in this bind of if there's certain things that, ideas that you want them to get, an easy way would be to present the ideas to them. The other option would be to go back over and still try to draw it out, even because they did have some information. It was just trying to get them to see the ties and kind of subtly work it. (Interview, 10/9)

Lansbury was like the director of a Broadway play who has his own

interpretation and conception of the script but desires to grant his actors some autonomy. On some occasions Lansbury successfully managed the dilemma. During one class discussion on the Tinker vs. DesMoines case students cited the clear and present danger and strict construction standards used by previous courts to defend their position on the issue. By the end of the session, Lansbury had the students debating the application of these same standards to the hats and coats policy at the high school. On other occasions, like the economic equality discussion described earlier, he was less successful. Frustrated with the failure of the class to apply past legislation and court precedents to their understanding of affirmative action, Lansbury became a disseminator of the right answers, thus ensuring that the information he had selected was in place.

The **participation dilemma** began with Lansbury's desire for a structured, disciplined pattern of investigation that probed ideas with intellectual rigor. Without such a pattern, Lansbury believed that the discussion would become unfocused, emotive, and repetitious. The price he paid for this systematic pattern was the reluctance of some students to talk, perceiving the pattern and tone as judgmental and threatening. Lansbury was aware that, in addition to the personality of the quieter students, the reluctance to speak was related to the structure of the discussion. He recalled a conversation with a student:

> The other thing he said which was interesting--I don't know how to deal with this necessarily--is he said that he's having difficulty because the conversation is so formally structured. That there is specific, almost like

> rules to follow and that if it was just where you could talk, he would feel more comfortable but having to be disciplined makes it difficult for him to get involved. (Interview, 12/10)

The student survey confirmed other elements of the dilemma. While the survey indicated a wide variation in the frequency of participation, one student commented that she was afraid to voice her opinion, even if she knew what to say, because she feared student reaction. Lansbury reacted seriously to this reluctance, talking to students individually and encouraging them to write comments before they spoke. Despite his attempts, the problem persisted.

As I observed class and scored discussions, one of my most persistent impressions was the wealth of available knowledge that went unused by students. This observation led to the identification of the **information dilemma**. Because Lansbury did not want to waste valuable class time on reading more efficiently completed at home, his activities in class depended on information supplied and read for homework. However, Lansbury discovered that some students were not completing the readings, thereby short-circuiting his activities. Lansbury coped with the dilemma by reducing the length of the reading, asking the students to complete worksheets composed largely of recall questions, and adding recall items to the unit test. Although uncomfortable and dissatisfied with these conventional motivators and doubtful of their effectiveness, he had discovered no other choices.

These three teaching dilemmas reveal a central problem facing in-depth study in practice. That problem involves developing an

information base necessary for higher order thinking and encouraging students to struggle with that information base in an environment that promotes open, non-threatening discourse. The problem resurrects persisting curricular questions. Whose knowledge should serve as the information base? How much knowledge is enough? How do you create a safe, open, and challenging environment to acquire and struggle with the knowledge? Despite his preferences, Lansbury at times answered these questions in traditional ways. He decided what knowledge was of most worth, either by dominating class discussion or relying on tests and worksheets. Striking at the heart of the definition of in-depth study, this conclusion exposes the difficulty of creating the rich, divergent knowledge and promoting the spirit of inquiry required for in-depth study.

Lansbury's role as a dilemma manager stems from three sources: 1) his beliefs and knowledge about teaching and learning, 2) the reality of classroom interaction, and 3) contextual forces outside the classroom. First, from his training in political science Lansbury had acquired a set of legal concepts and a Socratic style that formed the foundation for his curriculum and discourse patterns. At the same time, this strong subject matter background influenced the self-imposed pressure Lansbury felt to select and cover content and thus his tendency to become more directive. Likewise, he had doubts about the ability developmentally of tenth graders to handle the expected level of abstraction. These doubts fed his tendency to become directive and restrict student autonomy in the selection of data.

Second, the multidimensional, immediate, public, and unpredictable nature of social interaction in the classroom contributed to the formation of the participation dilemma. His systematic discourse pattern required total student concentration. Some students felt threatened or embarrassed when asked to respond in front of thirty peers who might judge them. Thus, in the real world of everyday classroom interaction, Lansbury's desire to pursue a rational, structured conversation confronted a reluctance to talk that emerged from the rapid pace and difficulty of the discourse as well as the personal fears of students.

Third, certain institutional features within the school and broader social forces outside the school interacted to create Lansbury's dilemmas. For example, the ninth grade U.S. history program at the high school that emphasized passive memorization had programmed students to sit and wait for someone to tell them the answer. Now in the tenth grade they were expected to participate actively and use information to make decisions. In addition, Lansbury claimed that student culture in the 90s was "becoming more conservative, more willing to live with decisions of some authority without questioning whether that's a good thing or not . . ." (Interview, 9/23). The compliance and passivity of his students reflected a more pervasive social pattern that devalued schooling except as a means to secure the credential. He claimed that these social forces were detrimental to his style of discourse and his ability to encourage students to struggle with the information base. These institutional and societal forces, combined with

Lansbury's conflicted beliefs and the complexity of classroom interaction, created the three dilemmas Lansbury which gave practical meaning to the theoretical definition of in-depth study.

Missing so far from the description and analysis are the voices of the students, particularly the meaning they gave to the classroom interaction and the knowledge. The student interviews and survey revealed multiple meanings about the character of classroom interaction. Tim McClaine, who participated frequently in class and scored discussions, praised the interaction as "thought-provoking" and "user-friendly," describing the class atmosphere as "club-like" where "you get a chance to express what you feel and hopefully provoke others to feel the same way" (Interview, 10/8). Lisa Lerner, who participated occasionally, liked class discussion and listened carefully, but participated less because she had "a tendency to wait and then . . .a person around [her] said it first" (Interview, 10/14). Mike Rogers described the discussions as "long and boring," perceiving them as lectures, not opportunities to express his opinions. He came to class, listened, participated when asked, and was not disruptive, but was rarely engaged in the interaction. For some like Lisa and Kelly Webber the interaction had meaning outside the classroom, creating a model for conversation about issues with their friends or parents. In the voices of some students was a sense of empowerment that they knew how to talk maturely with others.

More significantly, I found statements in both the interviews and student surveys which indicated changed dispositions toward

knowledge. Students expressed an awareness that knowledge could be controversial, consisting of many sides and viewpoints. They expressed an open-mindedness and tolerance toward viewpoints other than their own and a healthy doubt about their own understanding of knowledge. Listen to student voices from the survey:

> "Free speech is more complicated--some speech can hurt people; I used to believe you could say anything you wanted."
>
> "There are more than one side to an argument. People have reasons for any side you take. Just because you don't agree with someone doesn't mean you shouldn't understand them."

These impressions were confirmed by Tim in an interview after the scored discussion on race and affirmative action:

> The race issue I simply thought it was: "you're either a racist or you're not a racist." Or "blacks should advance or blacks should not advance." But now I realize that there's all these intertwined things, like poverty is a factor and discrimination in jobs which I didn't realize before. (Interview, 12/17)

These dispositions are consistent with the way knowledge was organized and utilized in the class and the nature of the interaction. Although the teaching dilemmas did strain genuine interaction about knowledge at times, significant dialogue between the teacher and student and among students did occur frequently. Lansbury asked challenging questions, devoted significant time to them, and encouraged a variety of perspectives on each topic. Out of this structure and classroom environment flowed these new student dispositions toward knowledge.

Conclusion. There is no doubt that the definition of in-depth study encountered challenges in the context of the everyday

classroom. These challenges took the form of teaching dilemmas that gave pedagogical meaning to the elements of the definition and raised questions that Lansbury had to answer. Whose or what knowledge should guide the inquiry? How do you integrate student knowledge and experience with subject matter knowledge? Did students have enough information? What if students chose not to read, no less search for, the knowledge that they were to interpret? What type of classroom environment encouraged students to talk about the knowledge in a thoughtful and productive way? What if key subject matter had not been introduced as the unit reached its third week? As Lansbury confronted these questions, he found one foot on the depth train while the other remained on the platform. His version of in-depth study was a hybrid of the definition, a result of the way he managed the dilemmas.

Thus, while social studies educators have proposed in-depth study as a response to the coverage disease, this research suggests that such a reform creates new conflicts and expectations for teachers, students, and the social and institutional context in which they exist. First, depth study requires a different role for the teacher and student regarding the knowledge base for learning. No longer the disseminator of knowledge, the teacher's role requires greater spontaneity and flexibility in a complex environment and challenges teacher beliefs about what knowledge is of most worth. Likewise for the learner, in-depth study requires a different role, shifting responsibility for understanding to them and challenging them to struggle with the knowledge base. This is

a formidable challenge even for the most able learner. Second, in-depth study requires a different pattern of classroom interaction where genuine dialogue between teacher and students and among students on substantive issues is expected. For the teacher such a pattern is more unpredictable and less subject to control. For the student the pattern is more challenging and risky because of the expectation that she be able to articulate ideas, use information, and ask questions. Third, in-depth study depends on the interplay of certain contextual factors like the nature of student culture in the 90s, the availability of materials beyond the textbook, and the existence of state and local standards and assessment. It is no accident that in-depth study occurred in a public issues course where no prescribed body of knowledge existed or would ever be assessed. Thus, as Cuban (1984) reminds us, there are boundaries in and outside the classroom that limit teachers to hybrid reforms that fit easily into their school and classroom context.

Despite the value of these cautionary words, the research does suggest some positive directions for social studies reform. The students in Lansbury's classroom reported a more complex, diverse, tentative, and skeptical disposition toward knowledge. Two themes underlay the growth of this disposition. First, the disposition occurred in a classroom where knowledge was organized around essential and authentic questions and was utilized to propose and evaluate options for decision-making. Second, the disposition occurred in a classroom where discourse extended beyond lecture and recitation and contained opportunities for interaction about

diverse ideas. These two themes have implications for both practice and theory.

In terms of practice, the themes suggest that in the planning of lessons and units, it is important for teachers to identify essential and authentic questions to serve as organizing features and to design learning activities that combine decision-making and problem-solving tasks with opportunities for genuine discourse between teacher and student and among students. The research also suggests that teachers might benefit from identifying dilemmas in their own teaching, their origins, and alternative ways of managing them. At the same time, it is important that teachers realize that the existence of teaching dilemmas is not a sign of failure but a natural outcome of their beliefs, the reality of social interaction, and outside contextual factors.

In terms of theory, the research confirms the notion that thinking about and understanding knowledge depend on: 1) its organization around key ideas, 2) a functional base where the learner uses knowledge to solve problems, and 3) a social setting where the learner interacts with teachers and students. These theoretical elements serve as useful guidelines for moving social studies reform in the direction of a pedagogy that promotes dispositions desirable for informed and thoughtful citizens. However, these theoretical elements confront powerful teaching dilemmas when played out in practice. These dilemmas reveal new roles for teachers and students and uncover obstacles that in part block the fulfillment of theoretical promises. Fulfilling the

promise of reform such as in-depth study may in part rest on our ability to understand and manage these dilemmas and their sources more astutely.

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